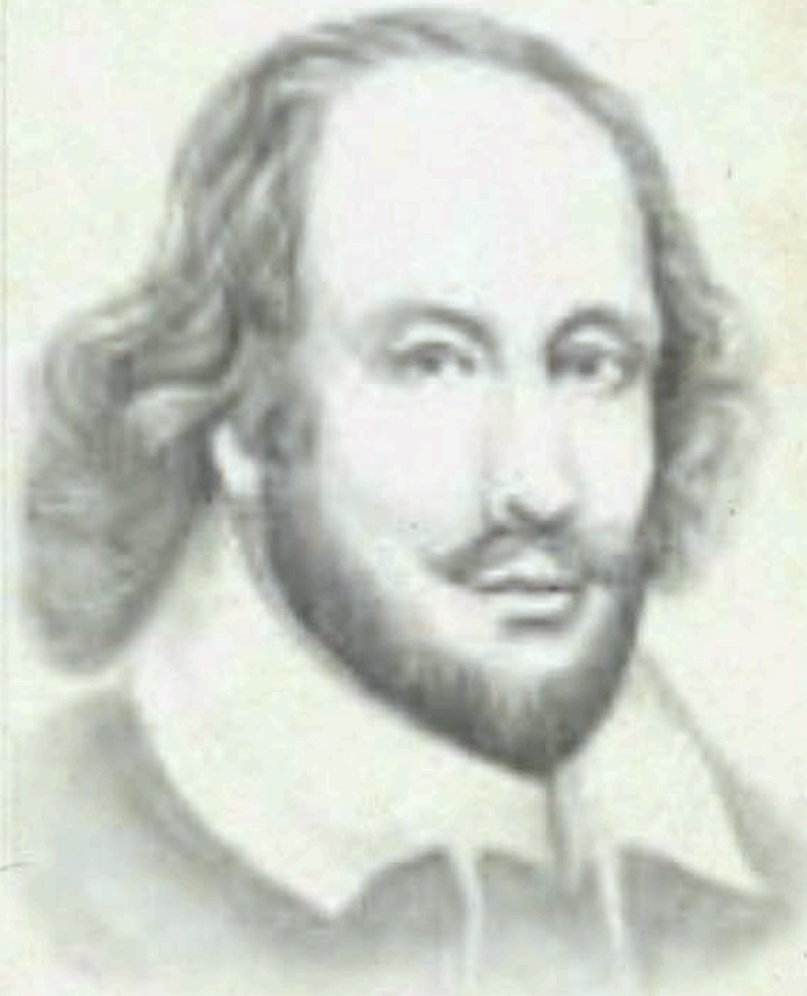
The Bard and the Bible



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1969

The Bard and the Bible

This booklet lists the places where Shakespeare's wording is very close to, or unmistakably echoes, the wording of an English Bible; some are exact quotation others only allusions.

Part 1 Quotations incorporated into dialogue: Shakespeare rarely puts a biblical quotation in quotation marks; he usually incorporates it into the narrative.

Here are some of the clearest examples.

Direct or very close biblical quotations in Shakespeare:

Richard II, 3.2 (Matthew 26:52)
"For he that hath a kingdom hath a kingdom, and he that hath no kingdom hath no kingdom."

Richard II, 3.2 (Matthew 26:52)
"Put not thy trust in me."

Henry IV, Part 2, 3.2 (Matthew 5:5)
"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

Henry V, 4.7 (Matthew 26:52)
"Every subject's duty is the king's; but every subject's soul is his own."

Hamlet, 3.2 (Matthew 7:1)
"Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?"

Hamlet, 3.3 (Matthew 7:1–2)
"Judge not, that ye be not judged."

Hamlet, 5.2 (Matthew 10:29–31)
"There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow."

King Lear, 3.4 (Matthew 25:40)
"Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are..."

King Lear, 4.6 (Matthew 7:3–5)
"The weight of this sad time we must obey..."

Macbeth, 2.3 (Matthew 7:7)
"Knock, knock! Who's there, i' th' name of Beelzebub?"

Macbeth, 2.3 (Matthew 7:7)
"Knock, knock! Who's there?"

Macbeth, 2.3 (Revelation 3:20)
"Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, i' th' name of Beelzebub?"

Macbeth, 2.2 (Matthew 27:24)
"Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?"

Othello, 3.3 (Matthew 5:37)
"If that the Turk of Cyprus us beguiled, / We lose it not."

Othello, 3.3 (Matthew 5:37)
"This honest creature doubtless / Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds."

The Merchant of Venice, 4.1 (Matthew 7:1–2)
"For, as thou urgest justice, be assured / Thou shalt have justice, more than thou desir'st."

The Merchant of Venice, 4.1 (Matthew 5:7)
"The quality of mercy is not strain'd."

Measure for Measure, 2.2 (Matthew 7:1–2)
"Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once."

Measure for Measure, 2.2 (Matthew 5:7)
"Go to your bosom; / Knock there, and ask your

heart what it doth know..."

Twelfth Night, 3.1 (Matthew 7:1)
"What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wild fowl?"

Love's Labour's Lost, 4.3 (Ecclesiastes 1:9)
"Nothing new, ladies, nothing new."

Hamlet, 2.2 (Ecclesiastes 1:4)
"The earth, I'll venture: how is't with you?"

King Lear, 4.1 (Job 1:21)
"Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return."

Hamlet, 5.2 (Job 1:2)
"The readiness is all."

Romeo and Juliet, 3.5 (Job 14:1)
"All days of the black and yellow colours..."

Henry IV, Part 1, 2.4 (1 Corinthians 15:33)
"Ill-weaved ambition, how much art thou shrunk!"

Part 2 Quotations adapted:
Many quotations are adaptations rather than word-for-word quotations.

The really unmistakable examples are:

1. Hamlet
"There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow"
"There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will."
and shortly afterward:
"There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow."
Compare Matthew 10:29:
"Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your

Father."
This is one of Shakespeare's clearest biblical transformations: the biblical sparrow becomes an image of divine providence.

2. King Lear — "Naked came I out of my mother's womb"
Edgar says:
"Naked came I out of my mother's womb."
Compare Job 1:21:
"Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither."
This is extremely close to the biblical text.

3. Merchant of Venice — "The quality of mercy"
Portia's speech:
"The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven..."
is not a direct quotation of one particular verse, but it is deeply biblical, particularly resonating with Matthew 5:7:
"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy."
It also reflects the broader biblical doctrine of God's mercy.

4. Henry IV, Part 2 — "Blessed are the meek"
Shakespeare explicitly uses the language of the Beatitudes:
"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."
Compare Matthew 5:5:
"Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth."
That is essentially a direct quotation.

5. Hamlet — "Judge not"
The biblical injunction from Matthew 7:1:
"Judge not, that ye be not judged."
is repeatedly echoed in Shakespeare's plays.
Shakespeare frequently uses the biblical vocabulary of judgment, mercy, condemnation, forgiveness and sin.

Part 3 Shakespeare's most heavily biblical plays

Hamlet — extremely rich in biblical quotations and allusions.

King Lear — Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Gospels are particularly important.

Macbeth — Revelation, Genesis, the Gospels, and biblical imagery of blood, temptation, damnation and judgment.

Richard II — biblical kingship, anointing, suffering and Christ-like imagery.

Measure for Measure — exceptionally rich in New Testament language concerning sin, judgment, mercy and forgiveness.

The Merchant of Venice — mercy, justice, judgment, law, forgiveness and Old/New Testament imagery.

Othello — biblical language concerning temptation, testimony, honesty, sin and damnation.

Romeo and Juliet — biblical imagery concerning death, resurrection, sin and forbidden love.

Henry IV, Parts 1 & 2 — biblical language and allusions are particularly prominent in Falstaff's speeches.

The Tempest — providence, forgiveness, repentance, restoration and divine-like authority.

Part 4 Partial Shakespeare–Bible Concordance

Shakespeare's Bible was not necessarily the modern King James Version, as the Geneva Bible, Bishops' Bible, and other English versions were available to him.

1. Genesis

Hamlet "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt"
Genesis 3:19 Human mortality / return to dust

Hamlet "The serpent that did sting thy father's life"
Genesis 3:1–15 Serpent, deception and death

Macbeth "Look like th' innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't"
Genesis 3:1 Strong allusion

Macbeth "The serpent under't"
Genesis 3 Satan/serpent imagery

King Lear Gloucester's fall and blindness
Genesis 3 Fall, knowledge, suffering (thematic rather than direct)

Othello Iago as tempter
Genesis 3 Iago's role resembles the serpent/tempter

Richard II Adam imagery and the fall of kings
Genesis 3 Fall from an ideal state

> Particularly important
> Macbeth 1.5
> "Look like th' innocent flower,
> But be the serpent under't."

This is one of Shakespeare's most recognizable uses of Genesis 3 imagery: outward innocence concealing the serpent's destructive intention.

2. Exodus

Shakespeare Passage Bible Relationship

Henry V Moses/Israel imagery
Exodus Israelite deliverance imagery

Richard II "honey" / Promised Land imagery
Exodus 3:8 Allusive

The Tempest Prospero's liberation of Ariel
Exodus Thematic parallel

Measure for Measure Bondage and liberation
Exodus Thematic

King Lear Deliverance from oppression
Exodus Thematic/allusive

Shakespeare frequently uses Egypt, bondage, deliverance and the Promised Land as political metaphors rather than quoting Exodus word-for-word.

3. Leviticus

Leviticus is less frequently quoted verbatim, but its concepts of sin, uncleanness, sacrifice and holiness appear throughout Shakespeare.

Hamlet
Leviticus 18 Sexual/moral corruption

Measure for Measure
Leviticus 18 Sexual morality and law

King Lear
Leviticus 19 Justice and treatment of others

Merchant of Venice
Leviticus 19:18 Love of one's neighbour

4. Numbers

The Merchant of Venice
The biblical idea of cursing/blessing and covenant appears repeatedly, particularly around Shylock and the language of inheritance.

King Lear
The imagery of wandering, wilderness and judgment can evoke Israel's wilderness experience, although these should normally be classified as allusions rather than quotations.

5. Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy's themes of covenant, blessing, curse, obedience and judgment are particularly important for Shakespeare's historical plays.

Richard II
Richard's conception of kingship frequently approaches the biblical idea of the anointed ruler whose authority derives from God.

Macbeth
The movement from legitimate kingship or usurpation or judgment strongly resembles biblical patterns of kingship found throughout Deuteronomy and Kings.

6. Joshua

Henry V
Henry's conquest of France inevitably invites comparison with biblical conquest narratives, particularly Joshua.
The comparison is structural, rather than a quotation.

7. Judges

Macbeth
Macbeth resembles the biblical pattern of a ruler whose rise through violence produces judgment.

King Lear
The fragmented kingdom and collapse of political order can be compared with the recurring disorder of Judges.

The famous summary of Judges — "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" — provides a particularly useful lens for Shakespearean political disorder.

8. Ruth
Ruth's themes of loyalty, kinship, inheritance and redemption resonate strongly with Shakespeare's comedies.

King Lear
Cordelia's loyalty despite rejection can be fruitfully compared with Ruth's extraordinary loyalty to Naomi. This is an interpretive parallel, not a direct quotation.

9. 1–2 Samuel
These books are extremely important for Shakespeare's treatment of kingship.

Richard II
Richard can be compared with Saul:

- anointed king
- initially possessing divine legitimacy
- failure of kingship
- rejection
- political replacement
- tragic psychological decline

Bolingbroke's rise can correspondingly invite comparison with David's rise.

Henry IV
The Davidic model of kingship and succession is relevant to Shakespeare's treatment of Prince Hal.

10. 1–2 Kings
This is one of the most important biblical backgrounds for Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies.

Macbeth
Macbeth's murder of Duncan resembles biblical narratives concerning:
- unlawful seizure of kingship
- murder of an anointed ruler
- divine judgment
- disorder in nature
- restoration of legitimate rule

The closest biblical analogues are 1–2 Kings, particularly the stories of Ahab, Jezebel and their dynastic violence.

11. Job
Job is among the most important biblical books for Shakespearean tragedy.

King Lear
Lear's suffering strongly evokes Job.
Lear loses:
- family
- authority
- home
- status
- security
- understanding of the world

Like Job, he asks why suffering has come upon him.

Hamlet
The famous statement:
"There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow."
is connected to the biblical doctrine of providence, particularly Job and the Gospels.

King Lear 4.1
Edgar says:
"The worst is not
So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'"
The surrounding scene has strong Job-like imagery of suffering and human limitation.

12. Psalms
The Psalms are everywhere in Shakespeare.

They provide Shakespeare with vocabulary for:
- lament
- guilt
- repentance
- enemies
- kingship
- death
- divine judgment
- mercy
- refuge
- praise

Hamlet
Hamlet's language of grief and mortality frequently resembles the Psalms.

Richard II
Richard's lamentation after losing his crown is strongly psalmic.

King Lear
Lear's cries against suffering frequently resemble the biblical language of lament.

13. Proverbs
Proverbs is one of the most important sources for Shakespeare's proverbial language.

Hamlet
"This above all: to thine own self be true."
Although not a direct quotation from Proverbs, it belongs to the biblical wisdom tradition.

King Lear
The play repeatedly contrasts:
wisdom and folly
pride and humility
speech and silence
riches and poverty
appearance and reality
These are central Proverbs themes.

Merchant of Venice
The contrast between outward appearance and inward worth also resonates with biblical wisdom literature.

14. Ecclesiastes
This is particularly important for Hamlet and Shakespeare's tragedies.

Hamlet
"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."
And:
"What a piece of work is a man!"
The meditation on human mortality, vanity and the instability of worldly achievement strongly recalls Ecclesiastes.
Ecclesiastes 1:2
"Vanity of vanities; all is vanity."
This is an important conceptual background to Shakespeare's repeated reflections on the emptiness of worldly achievement.

15. Song of Solomon

The Song of Songs provides Shakespeare with imagery of:
lovers
beauty
gardens
flowers
fragrance

desire
union
separation

Romeo and Juliet
The lovers' language repeatedly overlaps with the poetic vocabulary of Song of Songs.
This is usually biblical imagery rather than direct quotation.

16. Isaiah
Isaiah is enormously important to Shakespeare.

Themes include:
the suffering servant
judgment
restoration
kingship
blindness
light/darkness
redemption

King Lear
The motif of blindness is particularly striking.
Gloucester is physically blinded, while Lear initially suffers a corresponding moral blindness.

Isaiah repeatedly uses blindness as a metaphor for spiritual inability.

17. Jeremiah

Jeremiah provides Shakespeare with imagery of:
lamentation
destroyed cities
corrupt rulers
false prophets
judgment
national catastrophe

Richard II
The fall of the kingdom and lamentation over political destruction have strong affinities with Jeremiah and Lamentations.

18. Lamentations

Richard II
Richard's mourning over his lost kingdom resembles the biblical mourning of Jerusalem.

King Lear
The devastated kingdom, dead children and broken social order produce an atmosphere strongly reminiscent of biblical lamentation.

19. Ezekiel
Ezekiel contributes some of Shakespeare's most powerful imagery:

visions
wheels
judgment
corruption
restoration
resurrection
dry bones

Hamlet / Macbeth

Apocalyptic imagery and visions can sometimes evoke Ezekiel, although most individual examples are better classified as general biblical/apocalyptic imagery.

20. Daniel
Daniel is particularly important for Shakespeare's treatment of dreams, visions, kingdoms and divine judgment.

Macbeth
The supernatural visions and prophetic atmosphere invite comparison with Daniel.

Henry VIII
The prophetic dimension of political history has affinities with biblical prophecy.

21. Jonah

The Tempest
Prospero's island and the themes of storm, repentance, judgment and mercy can be compared with Jonah.
But again, this is an interpretive parallel, not a direct quotation.

22. Matthew
Matthew is probably one of Shakespeare's single most important New Testament sources.

Matthew 5 — Beatitudes
Henry IV, Part 2
The biblical phrase: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth."
is directly echoed in Shakespeare.

Matthew 5:7
"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy."
This is fundamental to The Merchant of Venice
"The quality of mercy is not strain'd."
The speech is not a verbatim quotation, but its theological foundation is unmistakably compatible with Matthew.

23. Matthew 7 — Judgment
Matthew 7:1: "Judge not, that ye be not judged."
This becomes an important Shakespearean theme.

Hamlet
Shakespeare repeatedly explores the problem of judging other people's guilt.

Measure for Measure
This is perhaps the clearest Shakespearean dramatization of Matthew 7.
The play continually asks:
Who has the right to judge another person when everyone is sinful?

24. Matthew 7:7 — Knock
Matthew: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."
Macbeth 2.3
The Porter repeatedly says:
"Knock, knock! Who's there?"
This is almost certainly playing with the Gospel's famous knocking imagery, while simultaneously turning it into comic hell imagery.

25. Matthew 10 — Sparrow
Hamlet 5.2
"There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow."
Matthew 10:29: "Not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father."
This is one of the clearest biblical allusions in Shakespeare.

26. Matthew 26 — Sword
Matthew 26:52: "Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword."
Shakespeare repeatedly uses this biblical formulation.

Romeo and Juliet
The sword becomes a vehicle for the destructive consequences of violence.

Henry V
Violence, war and judgment are repeatedly framed in language compatible with the biblical principle that

violence produces consequences.

27. Matthew 27 — Blood
Matthew's Passion narrative provides Shakespeare with extensive imagery of:

innocent blood
guilt
washing
crucifixion
betrayal
judgment

Macbeth
Lady Macbeth's famous attempt to remove blood:
"Out, damned spot!"
and Macbeth's:
"Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood /
Clean from my hand?"
belong to this broader biblical tradition of blood-guilt and purification.

28. Mark
Mark contributes especially to Shakespeare's imagery of:

discipleship
betrayal
suffering
service
crucifixion
faith

King Lear
The suffering servant motif is compatible with the Gospel's portrayal of Christ's suffering, although it should not automatically be called a direct Christological allegory.

29. Luke
Luke is especially important for Shakespeare's themes of:

mercy
forgiveness

repentance
the poor
outsiders
prodigality
reversal of fortune

Measure for Measure
The emphasis on mercy toward sinners strongly recalls Luke's theology.

King Lear

The treatment of the poor and marginalized has strong resonance with Luke.

30. The Good Samaritan — Luke 10
The Good Samaritan's central principle—that compassion should cross social and ethnic boundaries—is relevant to Shakespeare's treatment of:

mercy
strangers
enemies
social outsiders

This is particularly useful for interpreting The Merchant of Venice.

31. The Prodigal Son — Luke 15
The themes of:

sin
return
forgiveness
reconciliation
inheritance

appear repeatedly in Shakespeare.

King Lear
Lear and Cordelia's reconciliation is often fruitfully compared with the biblical pattern of repentance and restoration, though this is not a direct quotation.

32. John

John's Gospel is crucial for Shakespearean language of:

- light and darkness
- truth
- spirit
- flesh
- love
- death
- resurrection

Romeo and Juliet
The lovers' repeated light/darkness imagery can be read alongside John's:
"the light shineth in darkness"
from John 1.

The Tempest
Prospero's themes of forgiveness, transformation and restoration can be considered alongside Johannine themes, although these connections are interpretive.

33. John 8 — Light

John 8:12:
"I am the light of the world."
Shakespeare repeatedly contrasts:
light -- darkness
particularly in Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, and King Lear.

34. Romans

Paul's Romans is extremely important for Shakespeare's treatment of:

- sin
- law
- conscience
- flesh
- grace
- judgment

death

Measure for Measure
This may be one of the most important Shakespearean plays for studying Romans. The play asks what happens when 'law without mercy' is applied to sinful human beings.

35. 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 13 — Love
"Love suffereth long, and is kind..."
The famous Pauline description of love provides important background for Shakespeare's treatment of love, particularly in the comedies.
Twelfth Night, As You Like It, Much Ado About Nothing

Shakespeare's comedies repeatedly test whether love is:

patient
faithful
selfless
truthful
enduring

36. 1 Corinthians 15 — Resurrection
Paul writes about:
"O death, where is thy sting?"

Romeo and Juliet
The entire tragedy's structure of death and hoped-for reunion resonates strongly with Christian resurrection vocabulary.

Hamlet
Death, resurrection, judgment and the afterlife are central to the play.

37. 2 Corinthians
Paul's paradox: "when I am weak, then am I strong"

provides a useful background for Shakespeare's fascination with weakness and power.

King Lear
Lear's movement from absolute authority to naked vulnerability is especially relevant.

38. Galatians
Galatians 5:
"the fruit of the Spirit"
provides the biblical vocabulary of virtues opposed to the destructive passions.
Shakespeare repeatedly dramatizes the consequences of:

lust
jealousy
anger
pride
hatred

versus:

love
patience
self-control
forgiveness

39. Ephesians
Ephesians 6 gives the famous: "armour of God."
This imagery is relevant to Shakespeare's numerous uses of:

armor
warfare
spiritual warfare
temptation
invisible enemies
particularly in the histories.

40. Philippians
Philippians 2 contains the great Christian account of Christ's self-emptying and humility.
This provides an important theological contrast with

Shakespearean characters obsessed with:

status
power
honor
pride

The contrast is particularly interesting in King Lear.

41. Hebrews

Hebrews is especially important for:

sacrifice
priesthood
blood
covenant
faith
endurance

Shakespeare repeatedly uses sacrificial language in his tragedies.

42. James

James 2: "faith without works is dead."
This provides a useful background for Shakespeare's repeated distinction between: what people say they are and what they actually do.
This is particularly important in Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Measure for Measure.

43. 1 Peter

1 Peter's theology of suffering and endurance is particularly relevant to Shakespearean tragedy.
The innocent suffering of characters such as Lear, Cordelia and Desdemona invites comparison with biblical narratives of righteous suffering.

44. Revelation

Revelation is perhaps Shakespeare's most important source for apocalyptic imagery.

It supplies Shakespeare with:

- beasts
- dragons
- serpents
- blood
- darkness
- trumpets
- judgment
- crowns
- angels
- devils
- apocalypse
- the end of kingdoms

Macbeth
The play's witches, blood, darkness and supernatural judgment frequently produce an atmosphere comparable to biblical apocalyptic literature.

King Lear
The imagery of the world's collapse resembles an apocalypse on a human scale.

The Tempest
Its movement from catastrophe to restoration can be compared with the biblical movement from judgment to renewal.

Part 5 A summary of the most important direct quotations

Henry IV Part 2
Matthew 5:5 "Blessed are the meek..."

Hamlet
Matthew 10:29 "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow."

Hamlet
Matthew 7:1 "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

King Lear
Job 1:21 "Naked came I out of my mother's womb..."

Macbeth
Genesis 3 "The serpent under't."

Macbeth
Matthew 7:7 "Knock, knock! Who's there?"

Merchant of Venice
Matthew 5:7 "The quality of mercy..."

Hamlet
Ecclesiastes "What a piece of work is a man!"

Hamlet
Job / Matthew "The readiness is all."

Measure for Measure
Matthew 7 Judgment, mercy and hypocrisy

Richard II
Biblical kingship Anointed king imagery

King Lear
Job Righteous suffering

Macbeth
Genesis/Revelation Serpent, temptation, blood and apocalypse

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